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SUBJECT: President Tandja Tightens Grip on the Media

Ref: a) Niamey 00484, b) Niamey 00493, c) Niamey 00507

11. Summary: President Tandja boldly moved to assert his will over the independent media on July 08 by granting sweeping powers to the chairman of the media regulator agency, the High Council for Communication (CSC). Independent media organizations have been swift in their condemnations. The President's actions may prove to have a more chilling effect on opposition coverage during a crucial political season. End summary.

President Tandja Grants Media Regulator Sweeping Powers

12. President Tandja signed a resolution late July 08 to amend Law No. 2006-24 (July 24, 2006) and greatly expand the authority of the CSC chairperson. The resolution was implemented under President Tandja's invocation of Article 53, granting himself emergency authority to rule by decree (ref A). The CSC chair is considered by independent media organizations to be a pawn of the President and now has been empowered to take preventive measures without prior notification or approval from other council members if he determines that a media outlet has published or broadcast information threatening to the state or public order. The chair is now merely required to inform other council members after action has been taken, whereas heretofore disciplinary action could only be taken with the approval of a quorum of council members, formal notification and a hearing. This latest move comes after the Government's previous attempts to shut down independent media (ref B) were rebuffed by the courts and several members of the CSC itself (ref C).

Journalists Cry Foul

13. The political opposition and defenders of press freedoms decry this attempt to muzzle the private press. Boubacar Diallo, chairman of the Association of Editors of the Independent Press, told the French news agency Agence France Presse (AFP) on July 09, "This is a serious decision, a blank check given to the CSC president to act and we should expect a cascade of closures of media outlets." The President of the Network for Human Rights, Abdouramane Ousmane, told Radio France Internationale (RFI) on July 10 that all journalists may start self-censoring in fear of the "Damocles sword hanging over their heads." The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) wrote President Tandja on July 10 to register its alarm at increasing restrictions on the Nigerien private press. The Nigerien Organization of Social Professionals in the Media Sector, in a July 11 statement signed by nearly every major private media organization, said the President's move places press freedoms, independent media, and democracy in Niger in "grave peril."

Comment

14. President Tandja's actions to assert his control over independent

media in Niger are becoming increasingly heavy handed. Initial condemnations from the media have been sharp, but given that most independent media organizations run on a shoestring, the threat of suspension or jail time for unflattering coverage of the government may lead to excessive caution and self-censorship at a critical juncture in Niger's nascent democracy. Without credible, independent voices during the referendum campaign, the President's already controversial plan to extend his regime will be further delegitimized. End comment.

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